

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

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CRITICAL EAR

By CRAIG SMITH

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Cello and horn in excelsis The Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival doesn't always hit the target when it comes to programming and performance, but two of its recent concerts blew the bull's-eye right out and let a refreshing creative breeze blow into St. Francis Auditorium.

Zuill Bailey's July 25 performance of three Bach solo cello suites started off with an appropriately dancelike, confiding reading of the G-Major suite. He then did something unexpected: he spoke to us at length about the six suites' history, context, and structure; their revered status among cellists; and the personally challenging spiritual journey he takes every time he plays one.

Few performers speak acceptably from the stage, let alone well; most mumble or shout or pontificate. Bailey spoke well, even charmingly, and without condescension. He got a laugh when he said that, since he finds them so draining, he recently recorded the suites for Telarc in order to have an excuse not to play them publicly so often. And he explained that his 1693 Matteo Goffriller cello was constructed eight years after Bach was born and was therefore coming into its own when the suites were written, about 25 years later.

He then took on the demanding C-Minor suite and played it with aristocratic poise. He gave capsule descriptions of each of the dance movements either before or after each. His tone was strong but light, and his emotional projection was earnest. I had to leave before he closed with the C-Major suite, but I went out mentally dancing.

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